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Evolution of a Mississippi Farm From Cotton to Pecans.

Many small pecan groves in this state have so far passed the experimental stage that it is proved, beyond the possibility of successful contradiction, that pecan trees will bear profitable crops in Florida.

Prof. H. E. Van Deman is at the head of a company which has planted a large orchard of these trees in Mississippi. He tells of their methods of work at this business, in the Rural New Yorker:

If there is one mistake greater than another made by the southern farmers it is that of planting too much land to cotton. The center of the production of the largest crops of cotton in the world is not far north of the Mississippi, and this is also the region where the wild pecan, both in tree and nut, reaches its highest development. Having decided to plant a large orchard of pecan trees of the finest varieties, I organized the American Nut and Fruit Co., and after several years of thorough consideration of the whole subject, and examination of the various regions where this nut flourishes, I concluded to locate it where nature and man had both succeeded best with it. One of the old plantations on which cotton of the highest quality had been grown for generations was bought. It lies near the west bank of the Mississippi and fronts on Lake Concordia, which is one of the ancient but now usused channels of the great river; and at a medium high stage of water connects with it and is navigable for boats of the largest size. A railroad line crosses the land near the center and affords us a station. The tract of land that was thus selected as the place for our big pecan orchard consists of nearly 2,250 acres, over 900 of which are cleared and nearly all now in a fine state of cultivation, cotton being the principal crop grown. The wooded portion has thousands of giant pecan trees growing on it, and even in the fields that have been cleared the longest there are pecan trees struggling for existence, and so many cases flourishing. They are from stumps that were cut off and from nuts dropped by crows and bluejays that were flying about when pecans were in season. Every means that the cotton growers have used for their destruction, such as ax, hoe and fire have failed and thrifty sprouts have kept coming up annually, and will do so until the roots are dug out very deep.

The soil of this region is the richest of alluvium. It has been made through countless ages by the overflows of the mighty river that carried in its waters the leachings and washings from millions of acres of the great basin that it drains. There is not a rock, not even a pebble,to bother the farmer; and all the fault of the land is its almost level surface, which makes good drainage in time of heavy rains rather difficult. But a good system of ditches has greatly obviated this, and little water stands long in our fields even after the heaviest rains.

On the first day of February of this year we planted the first pecan tree in the orchard proper. It was set among the cotton stalks with my own hands, with the former owner of the premises and others to assist me. The tree was of the variety called Stuart, which is generally considered the best of the well-known kinds. This orchard we hope will be, and shall endeavor to make, one of the best as well as one of the largest in existence. Within six weeks from the time the first tree was planted we were practically done setting the entire 10,000 trees that I had planned to plant this spring. They cover nearly 600 acres, and are all in a solid block. They are set 50 feet apart, both ways, except where an avenue 100 feet wide and running from our station on the railroad to our plantation house intersects the property about the center. Providence favored us, or we could not have done the work as quickly as we did, which was really in about 20 days of actual work, for rains and cool cool spells interfered somewhat. All the hands were negroes, and had to be trained to plant trees, for none of them had ever done anything of the kind. Their life work had been to destroy rather than to plant trees. But they worked faithfully, and from early before sunrise, and with less than half an hour to eat breakfast, which was brought to the field, and an hour for dinner, we worked until sundown. The usual wages here for common labor is 75 cents per day, but I paid a dollar per day for this job, because I thought it was worth it, and to get the best service possible. There was no grumbling nor lagging, and I want to say in praise of these people, there was not on oath nor an ugly word heard by me on the entire job, and I was present all of the time. The average number employed was about 12 men and two women, besides the boys or girls who carried drinking water.

The method of setting used was with a spaced planting wire. I made one wire 1,000 feet long, using No. 16 galvanized and annealed steel. This was rather too small for its length and the tight streatching we gave it, and I will use No. 12 next year. It lengthened slightly from the tension, and gave us a little trouble by having to remark the planting points. I also made two spaced wires 500 feet long. All three were marked into spaces by soldering about four or five coils of a small wire about the large ones at points accurately measured 30 feet apart, and then by securely tying a small strip of red flannel at each, that they might be easily seen. Several tall straight poles were provided, to be used in lining up the wires. A small pocket telescope was used, in case it was needed, at times when the light was not good and the slight poles were difficult to see. We also had a small surveyor's compass for laying the base and perpendicular lines at the starting point, and to prove correctness of the lines at any time we desired.

The planting was done by stretching of this base line, and the two short ones at either end and at right angles to it. Sight poles were set at either end of the long wire, and three intermediate ones, but they were exactly on the base line, which is where the trees were to be planted. The little space given by stretching the wire a few inches in front of the base line was sufficient and intended to allow digging the holes and planting the trees without disturbing the wire. Some of the workmen had spades and others had 10-inch Iwan post-hole augers. With the spades the holes were started immediately opposite the marked points, and the augers were used to finish them to the required depth, which was fully 20 inches; for pecan trees have very long tap roots, and almost no side roots, and the soil being very deep and rich, the deep holes, 10 inches wide, were ample. The hands usually worked in sets of three; two with spades and tamping stick and one with an auger. By the time the first hole was ready, the trees having been distributed along the line from a cart in which a lot were constantly kept in wet moss, the two men with spades were ready to plant. They worked together, one holding the tree and tamping the earth about it, while the other filled it in with his spade. Within about 10 minutes, after the hands had become trained, a row was completed and the wire ready to be moved to the next place, and in some cases it was done in eight minutes. This included the entire work of moving the wire, setting the sight poles, stretching and lining the wire like a chalk line, digging the holes and planting the trees. Thus over an acre was planted in that time, for there are 20 trees along the line 1,000 feet long, and anly 17 required to the acre. The men soon learned to move the wire in a jiffy, all taking it up at once and stepping forward 50 feet. Those who could be trusted the most were put at the ends and where the intermediate sight poles were set. When a certain block was planted all hands picked up the wires, tools, etc., and moved to the next position. I rode a horse and kept close watch of everything that was done during the entire time, which was quite necessary, for there were new hands to instruct about getting and keeping the line straight, digging the holes, planting the trees and all such details; and even our oldest and most trusted men were frequently making mistakes, forgeting instructions, etc. But we got along very well, and faster than I really expected.

As soon as we got a block of trees planted I started wagons with loads of stakes six feet long and about like small fence posts, with men to drive one beside each tree, for its protection. Cotton,corn and cow peas are the crops that are being planted among the trees this year, and will be for several years to come, and my purpose is to keep the darkeys and the mules from injuring the trees. All that they need is the same space and attention that a stalk of cotton or hill of corn needs, and this they shall have. A trusty man will be put on a horse and charged with the duty of seeing that the trees are given a fair chance to grow. This they will do in this soil of unknown depth and richness, if not injured. They are set 50 feet apart, but in 25 years must be thinned to 100 feet.

We could not have accomplished the planting of this big orchard in so short a time without good weather and the tools we used. The soil here is very sticky, and rains are usually very frequent and copious at the time of year we did the work, which makes work very difficult and uncer-